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## Dream Border

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Dream Border

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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University of Soore Tehran  
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing, 2015

Dec 2022  
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

*Dream Border* is the result of my lived experience of relocation. The exhibition addresses the duality of being on the border between reality and imagination. In this place, the present, past, and future exist simultaneously. By engaging with personal narratives, childhood memories, as well as Iranian cultural and literary visual elements, I search for universal concepts in relocation. These works evoke the imposition of power and the many phenomena that the contemporary world endures despite globalization, such as anxiety, fear, and oppression on a small or large scale, which compel people to relocate. Uncertainty in the process of migration and the impact of displacements on people, such as fear of losing one's past identity, the feeling of not belonging to a certain place, worries about the future, and the feeling of duality in a new society, contrast with feelings such as happiness in pursuing one's dreams. People strive to maintain their identity by referring to their roots and memories while acclimating to their new society. The dream border is a portal: an embodiment of this two-way linking of experiences, facilitating discovery and understanding for those who pass through it

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## **Introduction**

My works are based on my personal experiences of a big relocation in my life from Iran to the United States. My works connect with the cultural and visual roots of my identity and memories that I manipulate to express my concerns about this relocation and its effects. Being born in a non-religious family in Iran and growing up in a society with a religious government created a massive gap between my public and private life. This contradiction has been more challenging for girls and women in Iran. A consequence of the everyday social tension in our lives was the immigration of most of the new generation of Iranian people to be able to express their thoughts and ideas to pursue their dreams freely.

Relocation is difficult because you cannot carry all your belongings that define your identity from childhood to now in a suitcase. You can only carry them as memories in your mind. Therefore, when I work in the studio, I am involved with all my childhood and adolescence memories. By drawing, I can control my mind and think about the damage they have done to me and how they have positively affected me. I can create a mixture of my ideal world and concerns like my current real life. When I pick up the brush and start working on a piece, I think the fact that my current visa type does not allow me to visit my country easily. I am worried about losing important aspects of my life. I think about my family, culture, and identity every moment because of being away from them. Maybe the concern about losing resulted from growing up in a political family and the image that was formed in our minds as children. The space that the family tried to show was a peaceful paradise for us as children so that we would not feel the loss of a family member because of having a different thought. The sadness and anger in their eyes, their low voice talking that they thought we did not hear them was apparent to us. Despite the pleasant moments that my grandfather made for us by reading stories and poems

in the world of childhood, we still felt what would happen tomorrow. Manifesting anger and shouting in the middle of a beautiful structure is something I felt again in my works and the displacement interaction. These days, I often experience the same feeling of my childhood, we smile, but behind this smile, there are hidden screams.

Worrying about something that is yours will be taken from you. In these recent months, when I have been witnessing the events inside Iran from a distance and in my migration process and seeing the efforts of my family and the people in the struggle with oppression to get what are our rights, I feel this distance, relocation, and worry more than ever. Also, my situation in the new place, the United States of America, as a person who has decided to move, is uncertain in the future. I constantly refer to my memories in this challenging position and excavate them. I found my mind lost in the place I called home and my different life in the US. In my works, I strive to create a world that is a mix of real-world and dreamed worlds, resulting from my own experience of having memories of places and people far from me, which will be exposed to fading. Displaying the mixed feelings I have experienced since I left Iran, the distance between joy and fear is a blink of an eye for me in *ghorbat* (a foreign place, being a foreigner, or being in a place where one does not feel a sense of belonging).

### **Memory and relocation**

A dream is the most beautiful manifestation of a moment because it is transparent and clear. Dreams contain selected and emphasized moments. My imagery emphasizes the contrast between my dream and my memory.

King et al. (2011) describes the experience of a generation of Greek immigrants who wrote in letters that they felt like they would be home one day. They were connected to

childhood memories until they left their homeland. But when they return after years, everything is different. Their childhood friends, environment, and family changed, and they clung to their memories. Everyone reacts to their displacement in order to maintain their identity connection. In this way, their emotional reactions are stimulated. People's memory objects may be special object that recalls intentional or unintentional memories of their homeland, home culture, and familiar places. These accelerate memory and make it easy to remember. They encourage people to take individual actions by stimulating their emotions.

What everyone has as a memory object stimulates thinking and strengthens imagination. In fact, it strengthens the feeling of preserving identity and belonging (Marschall, 2019). Marschall (2019) states that everyone's special things are their emotional companions, which are valued. The meaning and effectiveness of valuable things change over time and become more important with factors such as displacement, like looking at old family photos. The objects we carry with us as memories create a relationship between the old house and the new house, homeland and abroad, which are a kind of therapy. The role of these objects or the production of these objects plays an important role in recreating the sense of home and identity.

During the time I have lived in the United States, I have often thought about who I am in this new environment. Regardless of the fact that all people are equal, regardless of race, ethnicity, and religion, I have always been touched by the meaning of being a foreigner. Whenever I talk to people, they tell me where are you from? what is your native language? What is Iran like, and what are its differences from here? do you want to stay here? After answering the questions, I always feel different; how receptive are they to me? It seems interesting when we talk about our identities and cultures, but when we share memories and experiences, how much can we understand each other's identities?

When I work on a piece with a mind full of these questions, the interaction of self-definition and memory becomes intensified for me. The link between self and memory is very complicated, and sometimes, the border between them becomes indistinguishable. In fact, our memory of our personal past is formed when we think about who we are, and what satisfies our feelings about this question is our memory of our personal past (Libby & Eibach, 2007).

I believe that not only as an artist but also as a person who is far from home, referring to memory will create a two-way connection between myself and my identity with the identity of the new environment in which I am.

By moving away, the process of remembering both consciously and unconsciously becomes more and more. When memories are reconstructed in the present, they are never an exact copy of what was experienced in the past. Because all the current thoughts and conditions of a person affect the recollection of those memories, memories change in this recall process. They come to mind as fragmented, some details are removed, and some of them are highlighted, combined, or things that did not exist at all are added to them. In fact, the situation and the mindset we live with today intensely affect remembering past memories. What is made from the past based on the person's point of view today affects the person's self-definition in the current situation (Libby & Eibach, 2007).

When we look deeper into this issue, we can see that it is not just about quantity and quality of remembering. It expresses all the experiences we will have mentally in this process and profoundly connects with inner feelings. Their time intervals with today are understood very strangely. Sometimes they seem very close, and sometimes, very far. Mental images are produced from them, and the feeling of reconnecting with life is experienced (Libby & Eibach, 2007).

In my works, I provoke a connection between my memory and the mind affected by my new environment. Elements and pieces are separated from the memory, some are eliminated, and some things are added to them. They emerge based on my feeling, thinking, and approach today, resulting from living in Arkansas, United States. Many artists refer to memory as a subject with different approaches and policies. For example, Yoshiko Shimada, in her installation at the Christian Wilson gallery, shows that although memories are personal and unique, sharing them somewhere like an artwork makes the viewer remember things from their past that have been suppressed or forgotten. By collecting the memories of her audience from the war in a box in a private room and then showing them in another show, she engages all those repressed memories in a discourse against the conservative review of the events of the war and the influence of nationalism in the education system for the young generation (Borggreen, 2013).

As discussed thoroughly by film scholar Annette Kuhn in her book *Family Secrets*, memory work is a conscious and active process of telling a story about yourself from the past that constitutes who you are in the present. For Kuhn, family memories form narratives of identity within this kinship group based on what is openly told about the family as on what is omitted. Memory texts can connect people with time, place, and experience. "All memory texts ... constantly call to mind the collective nature of the activity of remembering," as Kuhn noted (210).

I am interested in working with memories and dreams and exploring how personal narratives may lead to a broader understanding of the culture and history embedded in private and public memory sources. Some artists use their memory archives to produce their artwork, which I referred to during my project, such as Hayv Kahraman, an Iraqi artist. Her personal history as an Iraqi exile who first immigrated to Europe and subsequently America is a source of inspiration for her work, which explores politicized gender and body politics, migrant consciousness, and the

margins of diasporic life. She shows feminine characters in her Kaalaman paintings as extensions of her own body. However, these women are not intended to be self-portraits.

In reminiscence, the reproduction of contents is in the form of sensory and visual perceptions, which are closely related to imagination. Therefore, it seems difficult to distinguish real images from memory and images produced by imagination (Gibson, 2007). Issues and sources related to sleep, dreams, and memory are still unknown and intertwined, so working on them and things that have always been unknown and questionable about my dreams and memories territory, especially after emigration, became more interesting to me.

### **Influence of memory in the framework**

The use of cultural and literary elements is tied to my visual memory and lived experience. They arise from my visual memory and merge with my memories to find meaning in my work. My disgust, concern, and criticism of the filth and blackness of coercive and colonial policies, the pain and suffering that was imposed on my family in my childhood and I lived with them in my youth as a young woman, and the heaviness caused by the relocation process with those experiences and the imposition of political and border restrictions on people who have migrated willingly or unwillingly appear in the forms of demons, screams, similar looks in the eyes in my paintings. My works are based on my lived experience of moving from a society that, although I am far from it, still imposes its limitations and coercion on me both physically and mentally.

My work starts from my personal experience but is not limited to a personal narrative. I try to provoke the imposition of power and the phenomena that the contemporary world is witnessing in spite of globalization in various forms, such as anxiety, fear, and oppression on a

small or large scale that encourage many people to relocate. Many people are worried about losing part of their identity because of the dream of crossing the borders to be able to have a two-way interaction with their roots and the new society in which they live and not be afraid of imposing power either directly or indirectly.

Furthermore, the cartoon characters present in my works today are the childhood heroes that I imagined in my childhood fantasies in real life. They were saviours who had immortality and could overcome all difficulties. Today, my childhood heroes have become real heroes, and they teach me how to go from one stage to the next and overcome difficulties in every path of life, such as immigration. They are the same members of my family who fought for their beliefs; they are the same people who are defeating the game demons today, both in Iran and everywhere else in the world.

### **Influence of visual and cultural elements in the framework**

The visual elements in my work are a combination of the imaginary, real world, and my visual memory rooted in where I grew up. The influence of Iranian miniature painting is both a conscious and unconscious point in my work. I was born in a city (Esfahan) that has been one of the art centers in Iranian art, especially painting in various periods of history. The city is full of elements of traditional Iranian art, from architecture, painting and handicrafts.

The architectural spaces and historic buildings in Iran usually have traditional large blue pools made of blue tiles within their center, as well as the colors used in the architecture of the city, such as Cadmium yellow, Quinacridone red, Persian blue, Ultramarine violet, and Phthalocyanine green have profoundly affected my visual memory. This place represented an

eternal paradise for me since my childhood; I grew up in an area full of colorful motifs influenced by plants and animals, bright narratives, and colorful paintings. Growing up in such an atmosphere has made my visual memory of specific colors and patterns.

In my works, I refer to Iranian painting both visually and conceptually and the meanings of visual elements. My interest in Iranian illustrations and poems goes back to my childhood and adolescence. My grandfather's house was our dream house when I was a child. A house with traditional Iranian architecture; the walls were full of reliefs of flowers and plants. There was a large porch facing a yard full of flowers and trees that my grandmother took care of daily. There was a pool among the trees where we played. Although my grandfather read political books and had political discussions in his workroom, he read and interpreted Persian poetry books for us outside his room. I became overwhelmed by my grandfather's big library when I was a teenager. He had many illustrated poetry books, such as *Shahnameh*, *Khamasa of Nizami*, and *Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, which he read and interpreted for us since we were children. The images included an imaginary and immaterial atmosphere of gardens, mythological creatures, and humans. They were stories that were both real and beyond the real world. It is as if all events and characters have been translated into conceptual elements to create a space for people to look at life differently.

For example, in a painting of Mohammad Zaman (1680-c. 1700), Through the lens of the artist's imagination, the Persian artist gets access from what can be seen in the world to a world and things beyond his observations and five senses. In the path of this discovery and intuition, he creates a work while passing through different worlds.

By following the concept of an imaginary world, the Iranian artist has been able to transform two-dimensional painting into an image of the levels of existence, elevating the viewer

from the horizon of normal life and material existence and their daily conscience to a higher level and making the viewer aware of the superior world. This physical world, however, has its own time, place, and form. This is a world in which events occur, but not in a material way. events are measured with a supernatural scale that enables the painter to show different times and places in a space that is encompassed by its uniform luminosity, which shows the manifestation of light in all levels of existence is (Sahebzamani & Lori, 2021).

Iranian aesthetic foundations of Persian miniature painting are based on an abstract perception of the world, meaning that the painter was more inclined to depict their ideal imaginary, world their imagination, and if they turned to the world around them, to imitate the space of all three. Next, light and shadow, objects' natural form and color, are avoided. In fact, a kind of abstract graph (stylization), symbolism, and decoration has been its features.

Iranian painting uses flat colors without light shadows to show the immaterial world the artist had in mind and depicted all the events of indoor and outdoor spaces together. This creates a multidimensional space (Pakbaz, 2005). I have always been not only interested in using the visual effects of Iranian painting and turning it into a contemporary piece by incorporating contemporary elements but also, I have used the insight of Iranian painting and its storytelling approach. However, I have tried to use this storytelling approach to create a contemporaneous experience that will be unique and far from the real world. I have also studied the influence of Iranian painting on contemporary artists such as Orkide Torabi, Arghavan Khosravi, and Maryam Hoseini, as well as Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistani artist who uses eastern approach and aesthetics.

I have also studied the influence of Iranian painting on contemporary artists such as Orkide Torabi, Arghavan Khosravi, and Maryam Hoseini, as well as Shahzia Sikander, a

Pakistani artist who uses eastern approach and aesthetics. It has always been fascinating to follow her work in exploring how a contemporary artist visually and conceptually uses her aesthetic heritage and turns them into contemporary elements in her works. In the past, Iranian paintings were mostly used to illustrate poetry books and narrative poems. They tried to depict their ideal space without merely imitating nature, such as three- dimensional spaces, real colors and forms, and light and shadow (Sahebzamani, Bagheri Lori, 2021).

One of the elements of Iranian painting that has always fascinated me is the design of Iranian gardens. Plant motifs and Iranian gardens, whose influence can be seen in paintings and works of artists, especially from Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) by now, can express aspects of Iranian culture and identity. Plant motifs or gardens, which are currently preserved in Iranian literature, architecture, and painting, are one of the elements that play an important role in Iran's social, cultural, and natural discourses (Sahebzamani & Lori, 2021). Gardens have been an important part of Iranian life throughout history. Remnants of these old gardens have remained from pre-Islamic eras, the Achaemenid and Sassanid, and after Islam during the Ilkhanate, Timurid, and especially Safavid eras. In the design of Persian gardens in visual arts and handicrafts, such as paintings and carpets, the central pond plays an essential role. Usually, the space is divided by two streams around the pond (Mohamadzadeh and Noori, 2021). Iranian gardens include three visual elements: plants, buildings, and geometric water systems. Two water networks connected to the central pond, like two arms, navigate the composition of trees and plants. Although the design of Iranian gardens is very diverse, the influence of Iranian painting from the design mentioned above, called the Chaharbagh, can be seen many times. In fact, in the past, Iranian visual arts follow the literary culture due to its connection with literature. For example, a poet like *Khamseh Nizami*, whose poems have many illustrations, has very descriptive language. This language has strengthened the relationship between the literary and visual areas (Mohamadzade and Noori 2021-17).

Binyon (1930) states that although Iranian paintings are decorative, with delicate lines and sensual images, this is only a superficial understanding of these images. They carry deep concepts. Iranian images originate from mystical literature. They use literary symbols and metaphors to describe the indescribable feelings of the divine. Poems are usually expressed in the language of a lover. The images of lovers or sages coming together in gardens, blooming trees, plants, water, and sky show the artist's awareness to depict the unity of the universe. There is a dramatic feeling in the images, but the dramatic expression of Iranian and Western images is slightly different. There is not much feeling in the portraits of Iranian paintings, and the dramatic expression in the pictures is seen in the composition and relationship of the figures with each other and what is in the background. Colors also play an essential role in this dramatic expression; although the shadow in them is removed, it makes them clearer and purer. Iranians enjoy heroes and legends narratives and have a romantic imagination. Therefore, these myths and heroes play an important role in Iranian illustrations, such as *Shahnameh* (a masterpiece of Ferdowsi's epic and national poems). These illustrations include mythological images of battles with evil symbols, such as giants and dragons among rocks and strange forests. They also include romantic and mythological images such as Lily and Majnoon (Binyon, 1930).

The influence of cultural, visual, and historical elements and their inspiration in my works always motivates me to think about how much and in what form they can appear in my works; What effect do they have on my work and audience? To what extent the inspired images can be faithful to their original or undergo changes and distortions? Indeed, the border between them in my work is very fine, and sometimes they merge. They cannot be limited to only visual descriptions or only to conceptual descriptions. They are a part of the cultural, historical, and visual

memory that have been preserved, and the Eastern aesthetics sources that have been referenced even in times when there has been no effort to protect them or efforts have been made to ignore them as cultural roots because of political purposes. Referring to these sources of inspiration in my works is a kind of reaction to visual memory in a society that is less familiar with them and makes it an object to create a bridge between the work, the artist, and the audience. In fact, this effectiveness is a kind of artistic intertextuality. The boundary between how to use these elements and refer to these image sources is the degree of loyalty to them. Because they are both similar and not, and they have changed.

Shamsayi (2017) argues that there are signs of magical realism in Eastern mythology, such as the Epic of *Gilgamesh* and *Shahnameh of Ferdowsi*, which include the fusion of the real and unreal worlds. In fact, the desire to express and narrate the history of the land through critical and analytical writings in the internal dictatorial and colonial atmosphere was the reason for the growth of this type of realism. From his point of view, dealing with magic, legend, and stories about heroes, demons, and fairies is one of the essential parts of the *Shahnameh*. The basis of *Shahnameh* is a myth. Myths separate reality from fantasy, and myth manifests a society's identity (Shamsayi, 2017). Ferdowsi tries to show ancient Iranian culture and mythology through the themes of *Shahnameh*. On *Shahnameh*, he states that in order to know the roots of identity, it is important to express mythological issues in society (Shamsayi, 2017).

The basis of the stories and legends of the *Shahnameh* is based on contrast, such as the contrast of light and darkness or virtuous and evil and their conflicts.

In fact, myths represent our ancestors' way of thinking, represented through symbols. If the truth expressed through myths is not objective, the narrators present truths by combining these symbols.

In fact, myths are systematic thinking and are not imaginary. In this space, although there is imagination, it is connected with reality, and the author prevents entering mere imagination (Shamsayi, 2017).

### **3D Material Concept**

Working with soil and clay in ceramics is a deep experience in touching the soil as a reminder of a historical relationship with the identity of people, the birth and production of a unique identity for my objects. When I make an open-mouthed and screaming head out of the soil, it is like building a dream border and breaking the limits of geographical and political boundaries. I determine where it will be placed. The experience of three-dimensional work in ceramics, as well as the architectural space influenced by Iranian painting in my works, has been the catalyst for designing and bringing three-dimensional space into my works and making 3D surfaces for drawing. I start my work by creating sketches based on a general idea. Then I collect my image and material sources and complete the sketches based on them to navigate toward a specific idea. These sources of visual inspiration include images of different figures and photographs of myself in the positions I have in mind, Iranian paintings, Iranian architectural motifs, cartoons, and games. During the work, sometimes designs change based on the composition of the multi- dimensional space of the boards.

Painting on a space that is not flat is like walking on a border that is not sure. It has two sides, it is dreamy and attractive, but it can be slippery and sensitive at the same time. This board is challengeable. Hence working on a board that has ups and downs puts me in a battle with

the ups and downs of my life. When the work comes to an end, it is as if I have defeated some of the challenges, and I have been solved in the process of stretching and distortions. This space and the painting on it serve as a trauma reliever myself. Complications, figures in complex, deformed, and distorted positions merge with delicate designs inspired by Iranian motifs. The figures reach a balance in dealing with the familiar memory and in designing a new space that is unfamiliar. This is just like the process that is experienced in relocation. It is an eclectic space where figures sink into recesses and breaks, stretch, and change. They are caught in a gap between home and a new place. Parts are hidden from the direct view angle, and the angle must be changed to understand the hidden parts.

## **Conclusion**

The dream border is the place where the real, imaginary, past, and present worlds are merged so that the audience may interpret them while engaging their own memories. The dream border is a portal for the audience to enter a world that encourages the viewer to move their body to understand and discover its hidden parts while looking at it from different angles. Tiles on the floor create a physical border dividing the space. Depending on their vision in this space, the audience can ignore the border created between the works on the floor and cross it to follow another narrative or ignore their desire to step on it and go around it to see another story.

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